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SUBJECT: Serbia: Election Announcement to Follow Troika Report on
Kosovo; Vote in 2008

Summary

¶1. (SBU) The leaders of Serbia's governing coalition agreed on November 3 to call presidential elections, only after December 10. The timing defers the call for elections until after delivery of the Troika's report to the UNSYG on the conclusion of Kosovo status negotiations and sets the first round of elections no earlier than January 10. The date of elections is still up in the air, and politicians and media speculate about a January 13 or 20 first round. The agreement allows the possibility of further delay; conditioning announcement of elections on the absence of a threat to Serbia's territorial integrity. The announcement temporarily overcomes an impasse on election timing that pitted the president and prime minister head-to-head and had brought parliament to a standstill. Political leaders confided both relief that the compromise agreement will allow parliament to satisfy all constitutional election requirements and concern about the need to fix dates lest Kosovo headlines annul the deal. End summary.

Coalition Agrees to Delay

¶2. (U) President Tadic, Prime Minister Kostunica, and Economic Minister Mladjan Dinkic, representing the three parties constituting Serbia's ruling coalition, on November 3 announced their agreement to call elections only after December 10. The government also announced that it would introduce in parliament by November 8 the drafts of the legally mandated legislation that must be in place before the speaker calls elections.

Media Claims Victory for Both Sides

¶3. (U) Media response has been varied. Independent daily "Blic" ran a headline claiming that "Kostunica gave in" and tabloid "Kurir" similarly credited the win to Tadic. Pro-government daily "Novosti" speculated that the agreement cemented coalition relations and established the conditions for cooperation.

¶4. (U) Media reports highlighted that the announcement of the parties left much indeterminate, including what the parties took in trade for the compromise and even whether elections will go forward. The press noted that, in announcing the agreement, Dinkic confirmed his G-17 Party's support for Tadic's candidacy and Kostunica's Democratic Party of Serbia explicitly reserved any endorsement. Nor did the parties announce whether local and provincial elections would coincide with presidential, although the speculation is that they will not. Most significantly, the political leaders' agreement stipulates as a precondition for calling elections that there be no immediate threat to Serbia's territorial integrity. Public opinion polls indicate that Tadic has a strong lead and would win, 54% to

46%, in a runoff against Radical Party candidate Tomislav Nikolic.

¶5. (SBU) G-17 Party leader Dinkic, in a meeting with the Ambassador just prior to the announcement of the agreement, confirmed that he had met with President Tadic, the night of November 2 and that Tadic had confirmed that a deal with Kostunica was in place. Dinkic, whose party firmly supports Tadic in the presidential race, seemed relaxed, even relieved. He said that he wanted to see elections locked in before the possible uncertainty of the post-December 10 period. Dinkic said he believed the dates would be announced soon, and expected the first round of the election to be January 20, with a February 3 runoff.

¶6. (SBU) Parliament Speaker Dulic, with considerable relief told poloff on November 3 that the compromise had averted a government crisis. The test of the agreement, he said, would come on November 5 in parliament when he would try to move pending legislation to a vote in what had become a paralyzed legislature. The speaker expected to call the first round of elections for January 13; the second round on January 27, but acknowledged that these dates could change. Dulic expressed relief, as well, that the new timetable would allow parliament to pass all necessary legislation and allow him to announce election prior to year's end, avoiding a potential conflict between constitutional requirements.

Comment

¶7. (SBU) With Kosovo negotiations coming to an end, a loophole that allows delay of Serbia's presidential elections in the presence of a threat to Serbia's territorial integrity is large enough to march an elephant (or entire province) through. The agreement may have averted an immediate government crisis, but it sets the stage for a renewed debate in December. As Kosovo status decisions steal the spotlight, expect further election delays, which, without changing

BELGRADE 00001504 002 OF 002

the likely outcome of a Tadic second-round win, leave the prime minister controlling the political agenda. End Comment.